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AUTHOR Harms, Joan Y.
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ABSTRACT

Student affairs personnel often need to enhance their assessment competencies to better implement assessment activities. This study identifies the assessment needs of both mid-managers and professional staff while suggesting how practitioners can utilize new technologies, such as Web-based surveying, to accomplish this task. It describes the needs of student affairs mid-managers and staff for assessment information and training; describes differences between mid-manger and staff needs; elaborates upon the feasibility of using a Web-based survey to assess those needs; and demonstrates how practitioners can employ the procedure in the field. A Web-based survey instrument was used to assess the needs of 98 full-time student affairs personnel, 26 mid-managers, and 42 professional staff. Issues of accountability and program evaluation touched all personnel in some way. The results suggest the importance of considering the assessment needs of all personnel regardless of their position. The Web-based approach allows for a quick and comprehensive assessment with minimal resources and technical assistance. (Contains 8 tables and 17 references.) (JDM)

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Identifying Assessment Needs of Student Affairs Professionals Using a Web-Based Survey

Joan Y. Harms, Ph.D.
Faculty Specialist in Research and Assessment
Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
jharms@hawaii.edu

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Identifying Assessment Needs of Student Affairs Professionals Using A Web-Based Survey

Joan Y. Harms

Abstract:

Student affairs personnel often need to enhance their assessment competencies to better implement assessment activities. This study: I) identifies assessment needs of student affairs mid-managers and professional staff at a research institution, 2) describes differences in needs between these two groups, 3) elaborates upon the feasibility of using a web-based survey to assess those needs and 4) demonstrates how the results and the procedure can be used in the field by practitioners.

Introduction

A growing body of research exists on the need for and the importance of student affairs assessment (Barr, 1993; Erwin, 1989). A comprehensive approach to assessment allows practitioners to demonstrate the value and the accountability of their programs and services (Hanson, 1990; Malaney, 1993; Sorochty, 1991; Upcraft and Schuh, 1996; Winston and Miller, 1994).

Conducting student-oriented program assessment has been recognized as an important function of student affairs administration (Erwin, 1989). Accountability and resource issues require practitioners to conduct a variety of assessments to demonstrate program value. Today, practitioners are expected to select or to design appropriate instruments to measure their program goals, collect pertinent developmental and environmental data, count and monitor contacts, process and analyze data, utilize results to improve programs, determine program demand/use, effectiveness and efficiency, and meet internal and external standards. These are only a few of the relevant tasks that demand the attention of practitioners.

Student affairs professionals are guided by best practices in learning and assessment published by professional organizations and leaders in the field of student affairs assessment (AAHE, 1997; APCA,1994; Upcraft and Schuh, 1996). Accreditation agencies also set institutional and program standards for educators to follow (WASC,1992). Professional organizations, such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, set standards of expectation for research and assessment (NASPA, 2000). The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education details assessment standards for student affairs programs (CAS, 1997).

Despite the importance placed on assessment, top student affairs administrators do not rank assessment competencies high in importance when hiring mid-managers (Gordon, Strode and Mann, 1993). It has been pointed out that student affairs administrators often rely too heavily on the administrative hierarchy to identify staff training and development needs rather than conducting personal staff interviews or written surveys to determine their needs (Upcraft, 1988). Research on the needs of practitioners is sparse.

Purpose

This study identifies the assessment needs of both mid-managers and professional staff while suggesting how practitioners can utilize new technologies, such as web-based surveying, to accomplish the task. This study: 1) describes the need by student affairs mid-managers and staff for assessment information, consultation and training, 2) determines whether there are differences between mid-manager and staff needs, 3) elaborates upon the feasibility of using a web-based survey to assess those needs and 4) points out how practitioners can easily employ the procedure in the field.

Method

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument (OSA Assessment Inventory) was developed during the summer of 2000. Feedback was obtained from the student affairs executive committee and from selected directors and staff. It updates a 1992 survey developed and administered by the investigator. The present survey is more extensive in item coverage, measures professional staff rather than only mid-managers and is electronic with web survey design considerations (Dillman, 2000; Nesbary, 2000).

The needs assessment survey contains five parts: 1) respondent background information, 2) degree of interest in assessment topics, 3) technology and electronic searches, 4) data analysis method and 5) scheduling and planning preferences.

Survey items were developed by considering current and future assessment issues of the institution. Assessment concerns articulated by student affairs personnel and executive management in the division played a major role in item selection. Topics promoted in national and regional conferences and workshops on assessments were reviewed for item consideration. A past needs assessment of student affairs directors served as a springboard to new survey questions. Finally, a review of the web survey development software indicated that the software could accommodate the survey item styles earmarked for the needs assessment.

Web Survey

Perseus SurveySolutions for the Web, one of several survey development packages for the web, was selected for its ease of use, quality, support services and price. Expertise in html programming was not needed. Survey items were typed as if using a word processor, but an existing survey can be imported from a word processor. Although the Investigator used the institution's server to collect responses, personnel can use their own workstations or a Perseus server. Results can be stored in a variety of formats, including ASCII TSV (tab separated values) files on the server or Microsoft Access databases on a workstation. The package also includes analysis, charting and reporting functions.

Three basic survey item styles were employed when constructing the survey: 1) Choose One, 2) Choose All That Apply, 4) Repeated Scale and 5) Fill In The Number.

Good principles of survey design apply to a web survey just as much as they do to a paper survey. Additionally, target groups not only require access to the Internet, but need to be users of the Internet to complete the survey. This survey was designed simply and with constraint with only two contrasting colors and no graphics to conserve computer memory. In this way respondents could easily access the web survey regardless of how powerful their computers or how advanced their browsers.

No personal identification numbers (PINs) were supplied since the study involved a well defined and small intact group of subjects who were responding to impersonal data. Subjects could be identified and verified as the surveys were submitted. Data on the server were removed once data collection ended. Since anyone can access an unsecured web survey, a system can be established to limit the access only to people in the sample and to protect the confidentiality of respondents.

In sum, the needs assessment web-based process used in this study can serve as a model to encourage other student affairs practitioners with limited technical backgrounds to conduct assessment research electronically.

Respondents

Of 98 full-time student affairs personnel, 26 mid-managers and 42 professional staff participated in the survey. The overall return rate was 100 percent for mid-managers and 58 percent for staff with an overall return rate of 69 percent. Mid-managers include directors and coordinators of programs; staff include faculty specialists and administrative/professional/technical (APT) staff. Clerical personnel were excluded from the study.

The student affairs personnel office supplied a list of classified full-time mid-managers and staff. Electronic mail addresses taken from a division personnel directory were

tested and updated. Announcements made prior to survey administration alerted participants of the survey administration. An invitation to participate in the survey was e-mailed to all personnel on the distribution list. The invitation was linked to the web survey. One staff member with no e-mail address was sent a hard survey copy and a visually impaired director was interviewed by telephone. The initial invitation was followed by e-mail reminders to non respondents. The ease and speed by which reminders can be sent by e-mail can easily lead to excessive use of the process. Care was taken to restrict the number of reminders to two.

Data Analysis

Survey data were collected via the institution's server and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Returns were also collected and monitored through an e-mail option provided by SurveySolutions. Percentages were computed on most variables, and chi-square analyses were computed where comparisons were of interest using an alpha level of .05.

Results

Respondent Background Information

Respondents had an average of eight years of experience in their current position or a closely related position in student affairs. Experiences ranged from .5 to 30 years of experience for both mid-managers and staff. Most personnel (40 percent) were from small departments composed of 3-6 members. The majority (53 percent) characterized their expertise in research and assessment as basic. However, two-fifths (40 percent) of mid-managers reported an intermediate level of assessment expertise.

Interest in Assessment Topics

Mid-managers and staff were asked to respond to 31 assessment topics by rating them on a scale of 1 = Very Interested, 2 = Somewhat Interested and 3 = Not Interested in obtaining information, consultation or training in these topics. Topics of high interest to personnel and important to division assessment goals will have potential for workshop and group meetings while topics of lower interest will have high potential for a consultative or information/literature dissemination approach to personnel professional development. See Table 1 for the 31 topics.

A Chi Square analysis was performed to determine whether there were any significant differences between the interests of mid-managers and those of staff. The results indicated that mid-managers were significantly more interested in obtaining assistance in "performance indicators," "benchmarks" and "development of survey items" than staff on a .05 level of significance. The results also confirmed some basic differences in the responsibilities of mid-managers and staff.

Table 1
Mid-Managers and Staff Very Interested in Obtaining Information, Consultation or Training in Research and Assessment Areas

Assessment Topics	Percent Mid-Managers Very Interested n=26	Percent Staff Very Interested n=42	Percent Total Group Very Interested n=68
1. Design assessment project	**67**	41	**53**
2. Identify what, when, who, how to measure	**67**	41	**53**
3. Data collection strategies	**60**	48	**54**
4. Data analysis	**58**	40	48
5. Data interpretation	**63**	47	**54**
6. Graph development	44	24	33
7. Report writing	39	31	35
8. Data dissemination	35	31	33
9. Data use	48	47	47
10. Surveys	**52**	41	46
11. Student tracking	**54**	37	44
12. Focus groups	38	28	32
13. Telephone interviews	29	10	19
14. Observations	42	21	30
15. Document review	38	21	28
16. Audio visual	43	30	35
17. Web survey forms	**54**	41	46
18. E-mail surveys and forms	**50**	41	45
19. Test scoring machines	29	18	22
20. Benchmarks *	**52**	24	37
21. Performance indicators *	**60**	35	46
22. Program evaluation	**60**	41	50
23. Accreditation	33	14	23
24. Use of Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS)	38	23	30
25. Write measurable objectives	**56**	39	47
26. Measure use/demand/need	**52**	41	46
27. Measure effectiveness	**60**	43	**51**
28. Measure efficiency	**48**	40	44
29. Develop satisfaction surveys	46	**50**	48
30. Develop quality checks	44	**52**	48
31. Develop survey items *	**50**	38	43

* .05 level of significance when comparing mid-managers and staff by degree of interest where 1 = Very Interested, 2 = Somewhat interested and 3 = Not Interested

Table 1 presents the percentages of mid-managers, staff and total group who rated the topics as "Very Interested." When 50 percent or more of the respondents rated a topic Very Interested," that percentage appears in bold print. Based on this 50 percent criterion, mid-managers were very interested in some kind of assistance in 13 of the topics and staff in two of the topics. The top two topics for mid-managers are "design assessment project" and "identify what, when, who, how to measure." The top two for staff are "develop quality checks" and "develop satisfaction surveys." The top two for the total group are "data collection strategies" and "data interpretation." This process helps narrow the field of topics to be considered for professional development activities.

Table 1 also demonstrates the importance of conducting a sub-group analysis, especially for heterogeneous groups. As noted above, if a needs assessment was conducted on only the total group the top two topics of the total group would not accurately reflect the top needs of both mid-managers and staff. Additionally, if assessment needs of personnel were based solely on the percentages of the total group and not of mid-managers and staff separately, staff needs would be overshadowed by mid-manager needs since mid-manager percentages are generally higher than staff and therefore would be reflected in the percentages of the total group.

Finally, topics with percentages lower than 50 percent may be worth addressing when the total number of respondents are large enough and the topic is important to the division or institution. For example, 48 percent of mid-managers and 47 percent of staff are very interested in "data use." The number of personnel amounts to 12 mid-managers and 20 staff for a total of 32 personnel very interested in "data use." With the current emphasis on planning and implementation based on data, such a topic may have more priority for personnel development and training.

Technology and Electronic Searches

Nearly all (95 percent) student affairs personnel check their e-mail at least once a day. The majority (55 percent) use Netscape Navigator 3.0 or 4.0 as their primary browser. Mid-managers use Excite (24 percent) and Yahoo (24 percent) as the most popular search engines and staff use Yahoo (40 percent). This information is useful for future staff development activities involving Internet based activities.

The top concern in information technology differed between mid-managers and staff. Although the majority of mid-managers expressed concern for all seven items included in the survey, the top concern involved the integration of information technology into program services while the top staff concern focused on adequate training in new software and hardware. See Table 2.

Table 2
Information Technology Issues of Concern to
Mid-Managers and Staff

"Which information technology issues are of concern to you in your program?"	Percent Mid-Managers	Percent Staff	Percent Total
1. Integrating info tech into program services	85	45	60
2. Financing replacement of aging hardware and software	58	45	50
3. Financing the purchase of new technology	69	48	56
4. Providing adequate user support to students	58	41	47
5. Providing adequate user support to staff	69	55	60
6. Receiving adequate training to use new software and technology	73	62	66
7. Using the Web in on-line and distance educational services	58	41	47

In regard to on-line searches, mid-managers express greater interest in the topic than staff. Table 3 indicates that mid-managers would like to know more about performing efficient computerized searches (69 percent), different search engines and their purposes (50 percent) and how to perform Web searches for student assessment data (50 percent).

Table 3
On-Line Search Topics of Interest to
Mid-Managers and Staff

"What on-line search topics would you like to know more about?"	Percent Mid-Manager	Percent Staff	Percent Total
1. Different search engines and their purpose	50	29	37
2. Performing efficient computerized searches	69	35	50
3. Web searches for student assessment data	50	41	41

Data Analysis Method

About half of all student affairs personnel use a statistical software package for data analysis as shown in Table 4. A higher percentage of mid-managers (56 percent) use them than staff (46 percent). Excel is the most popular package with both groups. However, SPSS and SAS are used only by mid-managers.

Table 4
Statistical Software Packages Used by
Mid-Managers and Staff

Statistical Software Packages	Percent Mid-Managers	Percent Staff	Percent Total
1. None	44	54	50
2. Excel	28	42	36
3. Lotus	0	0	0
4. SPSS	16	0	7
5. SAS	8	0	4
6. Other	4	3	4

Further analysis indicates that 20 percent of student affairs personnel perform content analysis using a software package. Both mid-managers (16 percent) and staff (20 percent) use Excel for this purpose rather than more complex packages, such as NUD-IST or Ethnograph. See Table 5.

Table 5
Content Analysis Software Packages Used by
Mid-Managers and Staff

Statistical Software Packages	Percent Mid-Managers	Percent Staff	Percent Total
1. None	84	77	80
2. Excel	16	20	18
3. NUD-IST	0	0	0
4. Ethnograph	0	0	0
5. Other	0	3	2

When asked if they would be very interested in an introductory workshop on Excel, Lotus, SAS, SPSS, NUD-IST and Ethnograph, 45 percent of personnel were very interested in Excel and 40 percent in SPSS. About 44 percent of staff expressed a strong interest in an introductory workshop in SPSS. There appears to be a sudden interest in SPSS since Table 4 indicates that no staff member is currently using SPSS. See Table 6.

Table 6
Interest in an Introductory Workshop by
Mid-Managers and Staff

"How interested are you in an introductory workshop on how to use the following to do statistical or content analysis?	Percent Mid-Managers Very Interested	Percent Staff Very Interested	Percent Total Very Interested
1. Excel for statistical analysis	44	47	45
2. Lotus for statistical analysis	18	19	18
3. SAS for statistical analysis	6	29	18
4. SPSS for statistical analysis	35	44	40
5. NUD-IST for content analysis	24	23	23
6. Ethnograph for content analysis	30	13	21

Additionally, at this institution, student affairs has a resource room where SPSS is made available through a university license to student affairs personnel, including student assistants, who are working on research and assessment projects. When personnel were asked if they anticipate using this service in the next two years, one-third (34 percent) of them plan to use SPSS sometime within two years.

Scheduling and Planning

When asked about their time preference for workshops and meetings, student affairs personnel favored early morning (27 percent) or mid-morning (27 percent). No one selected a late morning or evening period. Mid-manager time preferences were distributed throughout the day, but staff members definitely preferred an early or mid morning schedule. See Table 7.

Table 7
Best Time Schedule for Workshops for
Mid-Managers and Staff

"When can you best attend meetings or workshops?"	Percent Mid-Managers	Percent Staff	Percent Total
1. Early morning	20	31	27
2. Mid morning	20	31	27
3. Late morning	0	0	0
4. Around the noon hour	20	13	15
5. Early afternoon	0	6	4
6. Mid afternoon	20	13	15
7. Late afternoon	20	6	12
8. Evenings	0	0	0

Mid-managers (40 percent) preferred small group meetings and staff (56 percent) preferred workshops for personnel development activities. See Table 8.

Table 8
Preferred Mode of Personnel Development by
Mid-Managers and Staff

"In what one way do you prefer to receive assistance or training in research and assessment?"	Percent Mid-Managers	Percent Staff	Percent Total
1. One-to-one meetings	16	13	14
2. Small group meetings	40	22	30
3. Workshops	28	56	44
4. Telephone interactions	8	3	5
5. Electronic mail interactions	4	3	4
6. Literature	4	3	4

Summary of Results

This study used a web-based survey instrument to identify the assessment needs of student affairs mid-managers and professional staff at a research university. Results reveal the following:

- Most student affairs personnel characterize their expertise in research and assessment as basic.

- Mid-managers and staff have common assessment development needs, however mid-managers were significantly more interested in accountability measures, such as performance indicators and benchmarks. Mid-managers were also more interested in how to design assessment projects. Staff interests favored more specific service-oriented measurement tools, such as satisfaction surveys and quality checks.

- Nearly all student affairs personnel check their e-mail at least once a day and, in preparation for development and training, are positioned to respond to activities presented on the Internet.

- Mid-managers are interested in a range of information technology concerns whereby staff are mainly interested in adequate training to use new software and technology.

- Mid-managers are also far more interested in on-line search topics than staff with the greatest interest being in performing efficient computerized searches.

- About half of student affairs personnel use a statistical software package and very few use content analysis software packages. Both groups favor an introductory workshop on how to use Excel for statistical analysis.

- Mid-managers and staff also differ in their time preference for meetings and workshops and the preferred mode for personnel development. Mid-managers have no strong time preference and favor small group meetings for training and development; staff prefer an early or mid morning schedule and prefer workshops for training and development.

Implications for Student Affairs

Needs assessment now is just as important as in earlier years. However, today new technologies facilitate the process of obtaining meaningful data to support decision-making. A quick and comprehensive assessment of an entire division or of a specific

program can occur with minimal resources and technical assistance by using a web-based approach to survey administration.

Issues of accountability and program evaluation touch all personnel in some way. This study suggests that it is important to consider the assessment needs of all personnel regardless of whether they are mid-managers or staff. Mid-managers have concerns about designing an assessment project from start to finish but frequently it is staff that must implement that assessment plan. Some assessment needs are common to both groups, but there are also differences that must be addressed to serve both groups appropriately and effectively.

Assessment results can lead to better planning, implementation and use of resources for personnel development. These results enable the clarification and prioritization of goals and tasks while maximizing limited resources. The results of this study have been shared with the Dean and later with directors. The discussions helped to validate the results, to gather details and insights and to shape implementation plans.

Needs assessment results can be used to address individual as well as group assessment needs. If respondents are identified in the needs assessment survey, then individual consultations or the dissemination of pertinent literature is possible. On a group basis, small group meetings or workshops can be arranged.

A needs assessment is only one of many uses for web-based surveys by student affairs professionals. For example, the process can be used to obtain feedback on a report distributed to a wide audience on-campus, to develop a survey to measure the opinions of scholarship recipients or to develop an intake form to obtain background information on students needing program services. It also can be used to assess the needs of personnel enrolling in workshops. Workshop participants could be administered a web-based needs assessment survey while pre-registering for the workshop with the results used immediately to fine tune that workshop.

Lastly, the procedure reported in this study for identifying assessment needs using web technology generalizes to other program areas and to other institutions.

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